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Influences on the Collage of Ken Brewer

Ken Brewer

Eastern Illinois University

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INFLUENCES ON THE COLLAGE

OF KEN BREWER
(TITLE)

BY

KEN BREWER

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in Art

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1979

YEAR

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INFLUENCES ON THE COLLAGE
OF KEN BREWER

BY

KEN BREWER

B. S. in Ed.

Eastern Illinois University, 1972

ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Art
at the Graduate School of
Eastern Illinois University

CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1979

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze influences exerted on the collage of Ken Brewer by Kurt Schwitters, Robert Rauschenberg, and Alberto Burri, to explain the evolution of Brewer's work, and to serve as a source of ideas for others attempting to work in collage.

In the first three sections of the thesis brief overviews of the work of Schwitters, Rauschenberg, and Burri are presented. Schwitters, a member of the dada school of art, was a pioneer in the use of collage as an art form. He, like other dada artists, rejected the social and artistic values of post World War I Europe in favor of new interpretations of what art should be and what materials and techniques could be used in art. Contemporary American artist Robert Rauschenberg has drawn inspiration and ideas from Schwitters, and in turn expanded the meaning and acceptance of collage in modern art. He is best known for the painting, collage, sculpture combinations he calls "combines", but has also used collage in silkscreen, lithography, and transfer drawing. Rauschenberg is interested in the possibilities of utilizing modern technology in the arts and has created a series of work in collaboration with leading engineers. Burri's most notable series of collages are his sacchi, large paintings made by sewing together and painting on pieces of discarded sacks and various coarse fabrics. He has also created collage in wood, plastic, and metal.

In subsequent sections of the thesis Brewer's work is described, analyzed, and compared to that of the other three artists in the areas of technique, materials, color, composition, and symbolism. The section on techniques and materials contains an explanation of the use of approximately thirty collage techniques.

Brewer's work is divided into three categories; transfer paintings which were influenced to a great extent by Rauschenberg, collages which were primarily influenced by Schwitters and Burri, and a group of paintings that bear the influence of all three but have a character of their own. This series of paintings is the result of knowledge gained through studying the work of Rauschenberg, Schwitters, and Burri plus discoveries he made while assembling his collages.

Twelve color plates follow the text and present examples of Brewer's collage plus one example each of works by Rauschenberg, Schwitters, and Burri.

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PREFACE

The collages of Kurt Schwitters, Robert Rauschenberg and Alberto Burri have had considerable influence on the work of Ken Brewer, and yet he has combined elements of their work with ideas and techniques he has developed from working in the area of collage and created a style that is his own. In the first three sections a brief overview of the work of Schwitters, Rauschenberg, and Burri is presented; describing their major series of works, factors that have influenced their work, and their contributions to the development of collage as an art form. In the fourth section Brewer's work is described. In subsequent sections it is analyzed and compared to that of the other three in the areas of materials, techniques, color, composition, and symbolism.

I. KURT SCHWITTERS

Kurt Schwitters is traditionally considered a member of the dada movement in art. He like other dada artists, rejected the social and artistic values of post World War I Europe in favor of new interpretations of what art should be and what materials and techniques could be used in art.

In a 1918 Berlin exhibition Schwitters introduced the first completely non-objective collage into the realm of serious art. Picasso and Braque had used a few collage elements in their cubistic paintings as early as 1908 but "neither artist employed it as a major medium, nor envisaged it as such."¹ Schwitters, on the other hand, wrote "I have taken a step in advance of mere oil painting, for in addition to playing off color against color, line against line, form against form, etc....I play off material against material, for example wood against sackcloth."² (plate 1)

Schwitters was constantly seeking materials to use in his collages. According to the account of pioneer constructivist Nahum Gabo, Schwitters would "stop suddenly...in the midst of the most animated conversation... and pick up something which would turn out to be an old scrap of paper of

¹John Coplans and Walter Hopps. "Foreword," Kurt Schwitters : A Portrait From Life, by Kate Trauman Steintz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. xii.

²From Schwitters; foreword to his 1920 exhibition, Merz., cited by Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh in Collage (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1967), p. 61.

a particular texture.....He would carefully and lovingly clean it up and then triumphantly show it to you."³ Another friend of Schwitters tells of him removing a sign from the back of a streetcar "with a small screw-driver he always carried."⁴ Schwitters wanted the sign to use in a collage.

The following is a list of materials Schwitters frequently used.

Stickers, stamps, bus transfers, various kinds of paper, commercial trademarks and slogans, numbers and letters, coins, cork, cloth, buttons, nails, photographs, illustrations, words and phrases used for literary or autobiographical meaning, parts of words used as puns, silver foil, rubber stamps, candy wrappers, stenciled wood from crates, matches, and small wheels.⁵

The materials in Schwitters' early work were generally flat and small but "from 1921 onward...the objects were larger and thicker;"⁶ although, his works were all small by contemporary standards. The average size of a Schwitters' collage is about the size of a postcard.

Schwitters called his small collages Merz, taken from the last syllable of the word kommerz (commerce). When displaying some of his early collages in the Der Stum Gallery in Berlin, he realized that his work did not fit into the contemporary categories of cubism, expressionism, futurism, etc., so he arbitrarily named "the entire body of his work" Merz because the word appeared on "the most characteristic" of his works in the show.⁷

³Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh. Collage, (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1967), p. 83.

⁴Ibid., p. 64.

⁵Ibid., p. 60.

⁶Steintz, p. 23.

⁷Janis and Blesh, p. 61.

One of the strengths of Schwitters collages was the delicate balance of his compositions. "He laid them out with a sure eye for balance, symmetry, and effect."⁸ Compositions in his early work showed the influence of synthetic cubism. They were geometric and had few diagonals, but there was more variety in Schwitters' later work. Some had a centrifical composition with forms radiating outward from a central area. Schwitters sometimes made a collage, then cropped off the sides, making it look like a portion of a larger work.

The color in Schwitters' work was rather "somber"⁹ as compared to that used by the cubists and German expressionists of the same period. In most of his collages paint was not applied to all areas. The natural colors of his materials were used together with watercolor glazes to give a look of unity. In some cases no color was added. This was particularly true in work the materials had a weathered or used appearance.

Schwitters believed there was beauty to be seen in everything from the discarded objects he collected for his Merz collages to the screeches and grunts he sometimes used in his dada poetry. "Every artist," he wrote, "must be allowed to mold a picture out of nothing but blotting paper, for example, providing he is capable of molding a picture."¹⁰ The idea that common things properly handled can be used to create art was Schwitters' greatest gift to art.

⁸"Rowdiness Rediscovered," Newsweek, 7 Aug. 1972, p. 56.

⁹Coplans and Hopps, p. xii.

¹⁰Schwitters' exhibition, p. 61.

II. ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

Robert Rauschenberg like Schwitters has been an innovator and influential force in the development of collage as an acceptable art form, but he has had more influences to draw from including the work of Schwitters. Those influencing Rauschenberg, other than Schwitters, include Joseph Albers, Willem de Kooning, Marcel Duchamp, and his association with avant-garde composer John Cage and dance choreographer Merce Cunningham.

In 1948 following abbreviated terms of study at the Kansas City Art Institute and Academie Julian in Paris, Rauschenberg enrolled at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where Bauhaus veteran Joseph Albers was an instructor. Albers helped Rauschenberg develop a sense of discipline he lacked before coming to Black Mountain. While there Rauschenberg met John Cage and Merce Cunningham, innovators in their respective fields of music and dance. He developed a close relationship with both and shared their enthusiasm for creativity and change.

Another personal friend who has influenced Rauschenberg is Marcel Duchamp, whose "life and work" Rauschenberg considers a "constant inspiration."¹¹ Duchamp, a dada artist, at various times displayed a shovel, bicycle wheel, bottle rack, and urinal as "ready made" works of

¹¹Calvin Tomkins. The Bride and the Bachelors, (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), p. 237.

art. He felt that they could be art because the artist had chosen them to be.¹²

While working in New York in the early 1950's, Rauschenberg came into contact with Willem de Kooning, a pioneer in abstract expressionism. The influence of de Kooning and the abstract expressionists can be seen in the expressive manner in which Rauschenberg handles paint.

Although he has drawn inspiration and borrowed techniques from several sources. Rauschenberg has been personally credited with expanding the meaning and acceptance of collage in modern art. According to Time magazine critic Robert Hughes, "It is to him that is owed much of the basic cultural assumption that a work of art can exist for any length of time, in any material..., anywhere..., for any purpose..., and any destination it chooses from the museum to the trash can."¹³ One of Rauschenberg's ideas that has had a strong effect on the development of collage is that an artist may if he chooses display articles in their natural unaltered condition in a composition and give each image equal importance. His early works were in the vein of traditional collage with found objects filling space and providing color but losing their own identity due to the layers of bright paint that were applied. By 1954 he was placing artifacts he collected from the streets of Manhattan on his canvasses in a matter of fact way inviting the viewer to consider the aesthetic value of the objects. Rauschenberg's materials soon became more three dimensional, and he "found it impossible to hold them to the wall."¹⁴

¹²Ibid., p. 236.

¹³"The Most Living Artist," Time, 29 Nov. 1976, p. 54.

¹⁴Janis and Blesh, p. 63.

Some of his work such as Monogram, 1959, Odalisk, 1955-58, and Gift for Apollo, 1959, are free standing. Rauschenberg's works became "painting-collage-construction-object-sculpture hybrids."¹⁵ These combines as he calls them have expanded and perhaps outgrown the traditional definition of collage.

Rauschenberg is always experimenting to find out what is a picture and what isn't. The most celebrated of these experiments was when he took a de Kooning drawing and completely erased it then displayed it as a work of art above the caption:¹⁶

Erased Kooning
Robert Rauschenberg
1953

One of the objects de scandale of modern art is his 1955 Bed.

Rauschenberg claims he woke up one morning and realized that he had no canvas or other material to paint on, so he stretched the quilt from his bed and began to splatter it with colorful enamel paint. He added a pillow, then some more paint, then framed the piece for display.

Rauschenberg has called Bed "the friendliest picture I've ever painted. My fear has always been that someone would try to crawl into it."¹⁷

Two of the more recent areas Rauschenberg has worked in are silkscreen and lithography. He has had images of contemporary events commercially reproduced on silkscreens, then created compositions by screening the images onto his canvasses. These works, such as Retroactive I, 1964, (plate 1) and his thirty-four foot long Barge present thought

¹⁵Ibid., p. 260.

¹⁶Tomkins, p. 220.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 216

provoking visual collages of our time."¹⁸ "Rauschenberg's single biggest gift to lithography was the combining of photo images and hand drawing."¹⁹ His six foot long Booster was the largest hand pulled lithograph ever made at the time of its completion in 1967. Rauschenberg's 1974-75 Hoarfrost series was made by lithographing images onto thin pieces of transparent and translucent fabrics and assembling them in layers so that one sees the vague shapes showing through each other.

Rauschenberg likes color in his work to have "the same given quality as a found object."²⁰ While observing crowds on the streets of New York, he noticed that "the mass, no matter how colorful, never looked tonal. Someone might be wearing a bright red tie or green shoes, but somehow such things are absorbed, and all you saw was a general no-color, in which no tone stood out."²¹ This observation influenced Rauschenberg to start using color pure from the paint can in a random fashion.

The composition of Rauschenberg's work comprises a well integrated balancing of spaces and colors in light of the fact that he does no planning. He has said, "I'm opposed to the whole idea of...getting an idea for a picture and then carrying it out," and yet he realizes that an artist "can't help exercising his control to a degree."²²

Rauschenberg's work is not highly symbolic, and yet he has dealt with various subjects and areas of meaning during various stages of his

¹⁸"Most Living," p. 61.

¹⁹Sidney Felsen, head of Gemini Graphics in Los Angeles, quoted in "Most Living," p. 61.

²⁰"Most Living," p. 60.

²¹Tomkins, p. 215.

²³Ibid., p. 232.

development. Early combines such as Collection 1953-54, Charlene 1954, Hymnal 1955 contained personal images and allusions to his youth. After 1955 the combines had no particular subject but generally reflected the influence of the urban culture of New York where he was living at the time.

In 1966 Rauschenberg founded an organization called Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) to help artists better understand the possibilities of collaboration between the arts and technology.²³ Works such as his 1968 Soundings and Solstice were built with the help of a group of engineers.

His lithographs and silkscreens of the late 1960's and early 1970's reflected the political and cultural turbulence of the era. Since that time Rauschenberg has experimented with a variety of materials including cardboard boxes, fabrics, and assorted papers, and there has been little or no symbolic content in his work.

Rauschenberg, like Schwitters, immensely enjoys both art and life which he finds hard to separate. He is frequently quoted as saying, "painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. I try to act in the gap between the two."²⁴

²³National Collection of Fine Arts, Robert Rauschenberg (Washington, D.C. : Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976), p. 17.

²⁴Tomkins, p. 192.

III. ALBERTO BURRI

The work of Italian artist Alberto Burri can be divided into four categories, the sacchi (sacks), legni (woods), ferri (metals), and plastichi (plastics). He is best known for his sacchi, large works made by stitching and gluing together parts of burlap sacks and other collage materials.

Burri's use of worn sacks as a collage element may be in part a result of his experiences during World War II. Burri was serving as a medical officer in the Italian army in 1943 when he was captured by the Americans and sent to a prison camp in Hereford, Texas. For need of a pastime he took discarded burlap sacks and some art equipment donated by the Y.M.C.A. and began to paint.²⁵ By the time Burri returned to Italy in 1946, he had decided to give up a career in medicine and become a painter. Burri's earliest works were done in the manner of the expressionists, but by 1948 he had begun to use collage elements in his paintings. In 1949 some works included burlap, and by 1952 he had created his large sacchi (plate 3) by assembling burlap sacks that a miller in his home town of Citta di Castello had saved for him.²⁶ Burri built up layers of material then opened holes by tearing or burning. Burri has

²⁵Luigi Barzini, "Rome, Where Art is Forever Italy," New York Times, 22 Dec. 1969, p. 40, Col. 1.

²⁶Milton Gendel, "Burri Makes a Picture," Art News, Dec. 1954, pp. 28-31.

said, "I tear the cloth at times because I feel like opening up the thing and seeing what's inside."²⁷ Sometimes he patched over or sewed the holes shut after opening them. In some of the sacchi flat areas of white, red, or black paint were added to balance the more active textured areas.

In 1955 Burri began using wood as the basic material in his work. His grande combustione legno, as he called them, were made by disassembling and partly burning thin strips of wood then fitting them back together on canvas. Again, areas of black, white, and red paint were added. The legni are rich in texture and tone value due to the wood grain and effects of fire and smoke on the wood.

The ferri or metal paintings of 1958 and 1959 are also rich in color. They were made by welding together large pieces of sheet metal. The heat of the torch gave red and blue tones to parts of the ferri. Other parts displayed the natural metal colors at various stages of oxidation.

Burri began working with plastic in 1961 following a long trip to the United States and an illness involving a serious operation. His exposure to the great amount of plastic used in packaging in the United States or the sterile atmosphere of the hospital may have influenced his choice of plastic for a series of paintings. Burri used a more violent technique in the plastichi than in earlier works. He would put a thin layer of cellophane against a painted background then fix it to the surface by partly burning it from the front with a torch. Then he would build up several layers of half melted plastic in this manner. In the sacchi Burri took advantage of the natural properties of his materials.

²⁷"Beauty and Burlap," Newsweek, 30 May 1955, p. 78.

In the plastichi he was more inclined to impose form on the materials.

Some critics have said Burri developed his collage paintings almost totally independent of influence from other artists. Although he had little contact with his Italian contemporaries, Burri was aware of the use of collage by Braque, Picasso, Gris, and the dada artists, especially Schwitters.²⁸ Italian critic Maurizio Calvisi believes cubist collages influenced Burri's form, and the dadas served him as a source of ideas. He also feels the futurist notion that any material could be used to produce art and did not have to represent anything but itself, influenced his choice and use of materials.²⁹

The composition in Burri's work is a direct result of the manner in which he works. The action involved in assembling the materials is permanently fixed on the canvas. In the sacchi the surface of his canvas is broken up by sacks and rags that are sewn together. The stitches that hold the sacks together become an element of the composition, as do the tears and patches. The tension of sacks pulling on each other creates a visual tension. The speed with which Burri assembles the major areas of his compositions shows through in the crude stitching, reckless tears, and rough edges where materials meet flat painted areas. Burri's compositions are bold and bear the mark of the action that brings them together.

A good deal has been written about symbolic content in Burri's work. Many critics believe the holes and tears in Burri's sacchi

²⁸Cesare Brandi, Burri, trans. Martha Hadzi (Rome: Editalia d'Italia, 1963), p. 20.

²⁹Maurizis Calvesi, Burri, trans. Robert E. Wolf (New York: Abrams 1975), p. 15.

symbolize wounds, and stitching, the sewing up of wounds. They consider his liberal use of red paint a reference to blood, and the blacks an allusion to death. If this is the case, Burri's work could symbolize his disgust with the waste of human life he encountered in North Africa. Some think the paintings have more to do with healing than destruction. In Collage Janis and Blesh say, "Burri's intention...is to staunch the blood and suture the wounds."³⁰ Others feel Burri's work symbolizes man's inability to cope with the problems of the modern world. Italian critic Cesare Brandi believes the chance drips and tears symbolize the wickedness of chance involved in everyday life. He thinks Burri's work is meant to be repulsive and irritating in a way that will warn the viewer against becoming too optimistic.³¹

Though a good deal has been made of symbolism in his work, Burri has deemphasized it. He has said that his work is not to be explained in words but "conveyed directly to the onlooker by pure vision."³²

³⁰Janis and Blesh, p. 259.

³¹Brandi, pp. 36-43.

³²"Beauty and Burlap," p. 78.

IV. KEN BREWER

The work of Ken Brewer can be divided into three categories, transfer paintings which were influenced to a great extent by Rauschenberg, collages which were primarily influenced by Schwitters and Burri, and a group of paintings that bear the influence of all three but have an identity of their own.

Brewer's large transfer paintings, are done on canvas and his small ones on watercolor paper. In the larger peices images are transferred onto canvas from magazines and newspapers by using acrylic matte medium. The images are then glazed with a translucent mixture of matte medium and acrylic paint. The surface is worked with modeling paste and acrylic paint, then more images are transferred and glazed. (plate 5) In the smaller pieces, images are transferred onto watercolor paper by the use of lighter fluid, a technique Rauschenberg used in his 1959-1960 series of illustrations to Dante's Inferno.³³

In most of Brewer's transfer paintings there is a theme used as a point of departure. For example, in Morning News Blues (plate 4) pages and pictures from newspapers and news magazines are transferred and collaged onto the canvas. The images provide a point of departure from which the composition can be built, and at the same time are reminders of the unnerving events one is confronted with as he reads the morning news.

³³"Most Happy Fella," Time, 18 Sept. 1964, p. 84.

The collage paintings on the other hand are completely non-objective. There is no symbolism intended and even letters and numbers are used purely as elements of composition. Materials in the large collages are similar to those in Burri's sacchi. Large flat areas of coarse fabrics are played against smaller areas with more surface interest or color. Brewer's paintings lack the boldness of Burri's but possess more of a pattern like quality (plate 8). In addition to the large fabric collages, Brewer has made a few small non-objective collages in the manner of Schwitters. (plate 11)

The third group of paintings are those Brewer has developed by combining his own ideas and techniques with those borrowed from Schwitters, Rauschenberg, and Burri. These paintings, of which Martha Was Right (plate 12) is a prime example, are broken into several areas, each dependent on the other and yet having a character of its own. These paintings like his transfers have a theme that serves as a point of departure, but nothing symbolic is added at the expense of composition. Consequently symbolism is subtle and meanings open to interpretation. Although these paintings contain materials, techniques, colors, and compositional tactics seen in the work of Schwitters, Rauschenberg, and Burri, they look nothing like the work of the other three artists.

V. TECHNIQUES AND MATERIALS IN THE COLLAGE OF KEN BREWER

The primary technique used in Brewer's large transfer paintings is that of transferring images to canvas with acrylic matte medium. Pictures are cut or torn from magazines or newspapers, and the fronts are covered with matte medium. They are placed face down on the canvas and rubbed until securely attached. When dry, the back sides of the pictures are dampened, and the paper is rubbed off, leaving reverse images of the pictures on the canvas. In some instances only part of the paper is rubbed off, leaving a transfer-collage combination. (plate 5) This process partly destroys the paper and images giving the surface an overall look of decay. Several images can be superimposed and then glazed with thin layers of acrylic or watercolor paint. If a glossy effect is desired, the paint is mixed with matte medium or gloss medium.

In Fight of the Century (plate 6) photo-silkscreen, a technique used by Rauschenberg in the early 1960's, was employed.³⁴ Images of boxers were transmitted to a photosensitive silkscreen through photographic negatives and positives, then screened onto the painting with silkscreen inks. After that they were partly covered with paint, transfers, collage, and montage. A strip of masonite, parts of a tin can, and an old tennis shoe were added as elements of composition. The practice of integrating found objects into a composition was influenced by Rauschenberg's early

³⁴National Collection of Fine Arts, Robert Rauschenberg, p. 118.

collages; such as, Collection, 1953-1954 and Levee, 1955.

A good deal of acrylic modeling paste, which may be mixed with acrylic paint or applied directly from the can, is used in the large transfer paintings. Brewer has developed a technique he calls "rub-off" in which a picture is cut out and placed on the canvas, and modeling paste is rubbed over its edges with a paint knife. After the picture is removed and the modeling paste dries, the entire area is covered with an acrylic wash. Paint affects pure canvas differently than it does an area covered with modeling paste, consequently a faint outline of the image is left on the canvas. (plate 5)

In the small transfers lighter fluid as well as matte medium is used to transfer images. Pictures are soaked in lighter fluid and conveyed to watercolor paper by rubbing the backside with a ballpoint pen or paint brush handle. This leaves a ghostly image on the paper that can be drawn on or painted over with washes. This technique was borrowed from Rauschenberg who used it in several drawings during the late 1950's and early 1960's.

While working on the small transfer series, Brewer discovered that images covered with rice paper take on a nebulous appearance and integrate with the background. Rice paper can be permanently fixed to watercolor paper by soaking it from the top with matte medium.

In Liza III (plate 7) layers of colored washes were painted over matte medium transfers. The washes, mixtures of matte medium and watercolor paint, were allowed to dry after which they were sanded with fine sandpaper. The sandpaper removed all color from ridges created by the buildup of matte medium on the rough edged transfers and heightened the look of decay that is characteristic of transfer paintings.

Techniques and materials used in the large collages have been primarily influenced by the work of Alberto Burri. A list of materials used by both Brewer and Burri would include burlap, rags, wood, cotton, pieces of broken things, and assorted sacks. Brewer feels that the texture of his materials adds a dimension not realized in traditional painting, and like Burri, he tries to create surface effects that compliment the sensuous nature of his materials.

Brewer assembles his collages in a rough manner so they will not appear to be contrived and takes advantage of the chance rips, stains, and drips that result. Loose threads caused by the unraveling of course fabrics are left to hang, and paint is applied rapidly creating uneven edges where painted and textured surfaces meet.

Through wear, fabrics take on interesting surface effects that would be difficult or impossible for an artist to simulate. Brewer has tried to capitalize on these effects whenever possible. In Sack with Stripes (plate 9) brown and black stains and a faded label were used as compositional elements echoing similar tones located elsewhere in the painting. In Down on the Farm (plate 8) letters, numbers, and images showing through from the back side of collage materials were employed as form.

In most of the large collages materials are attached to the canvas with white waterbase glue. In a few of them fabrics are sewn together, a technique used by Burri.

The small collages (plate 11) were purposely done in the manner of Schwitters as an exercise in composition. These collages were approximately the size of a postcard, and like the early work of Schwitters, had a horizontal-vertical composition. A pattern-like effect was created by

repeating similar shapes, colors, and textures. The materials were small scraps of paper and cardboard collected from a roadside. Schwitters, who gathered many of his materials from the sidewalks and trashheaps of Hanover, once said, "the waste of the world is my art."³⁵ Brewer's collages were put together with rubber cement; whereas, Schwitters used a flour paste.³⁶

In Brewer's most recent series of paintings the compositions are broken into sections. The sections are sometimes separated by precisely taped edges. In other instances gradual transitions are achieved by painting acrylic glazes next to areas of collage and blending the glazes into adjacent surfaces. This may be done by rubbing the wet glaze with a paper towel or by sanding after the glaze is dry.

There are several partly veiled images in this series. Rice paper or gauze are placed over transfers giving them a distant, mysterious appearance similar to that of Rauschenberg's Hoarfrost lithographs.³⁷

In Martha Was Right (plate 12) a technique borrowed from Burri was used that creates the illusion of something coming out of the canvas. Small pieces of newspaper were glued to the white primed canvas, after which the edges were covered with a translucent coat of modeling paste. When the modeling paste dried, Brewer painted the edges of the newspaper pieces with white canvas primer. This gave the impression that the paper scraps were underneath the surface of the canvas.

³⁵From inscription on back of Schwitters' collage "Fur Bieleny" quoted in "Big Dada," Time, 15 Aug. 1960, p. 50.

³⁶Janis and Blesh, p. 83.

³⁷National Collection of Fine Arts, Robert Rauschenberg, p. 142.

In the same painting modeling paste was applied to an area with a paint knife, then covered with a thin acrylic glaze. When the paint was dry, the surface was sanded with fine sandpaper, removing color from ridges created by the motion of the paint knife. The resulting effect inspired Moon Shot, a painting in which modeling paste and sandpaper were used to create a surface suggestive of the rocky, desolate regions of the moon.

In this series of paintings transfer, collage, montage, "rub-off", and other techniques and materials from the other two series are used, but the compositions and general look of the surfaces are considerably different.

VI. COLOR AND COMPOSITION IN THE COLLAGE
OF KEN BREWER

There is no predominant color scheme in Brewer's transfer paintings nor in the series of paintings he has developed through working in transfer and collage. Colors are selected contingent on the visual or emotional effect desired in a particular painting. For example, in the transfer painting Morning News Blues (plate 4) contrasting colors are used to enhance the visual tension created by diagonal lines in the composition. In Moon Shot, one of the paintings from his recent series, extremely dark blues are used to give a sense of the darkness of outer space. A variety of grays call to mind the cold metallic look of machinery used in a space voyage and the austere nature of the moon.

Brewer has adopted Rauschenberg's practice of swiftly repeating colors throughout a composition to create an unstructured pattern, but his colors are not as stark as Rauschenberg's. Rauschenberg wants the color in his work to have the same given quality as found objects.³⁸ He once bought some unlabeled cans of paint he found on sale for five cents, and used them in his paintings without checking to see what colors were inside.

Color in the large collage series is similar to that in Burri's Sacchi. Most of these paintings are left the natural colors of sacks, rags, sheets of burlap, and other materials from which they are made.

³⁸"Most Living," p. 60.

The majority of these materials are neutral in color, although red and black burlap are occasionally used. Brewer and Burri differ somewhat on their use of paint. Brewer uses only small quantities of red paint or white modeling paste to compliment the neutral textured areas. Burri, on the other hand, has been known to apply large flat areas of black, white, red, or orange paint.

With a few exceptions, the same compositional tactics are used throughout Brewer's work. The layout of his paintings is basically horizontal-vertical. The same is true in the early collage of Schwitters and Burri and in almost all the work of Rauschenberg, who claims he "hates diagonals."³⁹

Despite the potentially rigid layout, a degree of visual tension is maintained through slight deviations in the horizontal-vertical format. In paintings such as, Down on the Farm, (plate 8) lines in the composition are almost parallel, and yet they are not. This delicate balancing of form creates visual pulls and tensions. In Fight of the Century (plate 6) where a more emotional effect was desired, collage materials were put on rapidly, consequently forms leaned more; and visual tension was created.

A conscious effort was made in several of the paintings to work in a rough manner so that the process involved in assembling the materials would be evident to the viewer. Instead of making an effort to camouflage the process of creation, as is the case in much art, an effort was made to preserve it. Brewer developed this tendency on his own, but its potential has become more apparent to him through studying the work of Rauschenberg and Burri.

In Brewer's opinion a painting must look like it belongs with

³⁹Ibid.

itself. Regardless of how interesting the various parts might be, he believes they must in some way relate to each other. He tries to create unity in his paintings by repeating similar shapes, colors, and textures and yet maintain enough variety in these areas to keep the paintings from becoming dull. This tendency was influenced to an extent by the strong, albeit loose, pattern in Rauschenberg's work.

Images in the transfer paintings consistently have a weathered appearance due to the process involved in creating transfers. Modeling paste is applied in an impasto manner throughout the compositions. In the large collages reds and various neutrals are repeated, a fabric used in one area is used in other areas, and the edges of fabrics are allowed to unravel throughout the painting. All of this adds to the patternlike quality of the work.

Brewer tries to hold the interest of those viewing his work by giving them things to look at and think about on various visual levels. Small forms and surface embellishments can be seen near the paintings that can not be seen from a distance, and certain visual surprises are seen only by the most observant viewer. For example, in the collage painting Down on the Farm (plate 8), one viewing the painting from a distance would see only vertical red and white stripes on the left, neutral textured areas near the center, and an active area in the lower right hand corner. At an intermediate distance one would become aware of letters and numbers used as elements of the composition. He might see the faded image of a label showing through from the backside of a sack and softly painted areas of white on the burlap. Upon closer observation one could discover such visual treats as the red, white and blue markings on a sack showing through a small hole in the burlap, or stitching where

other holes had been sewn shut.

This approach is also used in the transfers and new series of paintings. Areas where the surface seems to hold only texture, upon closer viewing, are found to contain partly destroyed images or images integrated into the background by the use of rice paper.

Composition in the series of work Brewer has developed through working in transfer and collage is in some ways unlike composition in the other two series. Although these paintings are still in a horizontal-vertical format, they are not so patternlike as the transfer and collage paintings. The canvases are broken into several distinct areas and yet the areas are in some way related. In Martha Was Right (plate 12) the upper portion of the painting comprises four geometric boxes, and yet colors and surface effects of this area are repeated in the very unstructured lower section where collage materials are employed.

There are subtle transitions throughout Martha Was Right giving the painting an overall delicate appearance despite the definitive separation of the various sections. Twin images of the national capitol are affixed to the surface by way of the "rub-off" technique, but they are so vague that they appear to be part of the background. Collage materials are arranged and treated in such a way that they seem to merge into one another, and scraps of newspaper can barely be seen under translucent layers of modeling paste.

An attempt has been made to create surface interest in subordinate as well as dominant portions of the composition in this series. In some of the transfer and collage paintings subordinate areas are so flat that they are uninteresting.

Brewer's new series of work is still in a state of evolution,

but at present the compositions tend to be more delicate, more structured, and less patternlike than that in the other two series.

VII. SYMBOLISM IN THE COLLAGE OF KEN BREWER

In Brewer's transfer and new series of paintings a theme is used as a point of departure from which the compositions are built. In the transfer paintings meanings are easily discerned, whereas in the new series symbolism is played down and meaning left to the discretion of the viewer. The large collages have no symbolic content and are intended to affect the viewer on a visual level only.

The majority of paintings in the transfer series deal with celebrity. In Liza III (plate 7) transfer and collage images of Liza Minnelli present the glamour of a life in show business, and yet the ominous figure of Judy Garland in the background reminds us that fame can destroy as well as gratify.

Muhammed Ali is depicted in Fight of the Century (plate 6) fighting and talking his way to the pinnacle of the sports world. A small picture in an obscure portion of the painting shows Babe Ruth in one of his final appearances at Yankee Stadium and emphasizes the fact that preeminence in professional athletics is temporal.

We're Gonna Make You a Star (plate 5) alludes to those who seek celebrity but instead find themselves in a situation where they must compromise their values to survive. It is a picture of decadence.

In Brewer's recent series of paintings images dealing with a particular topic are placed on the canvas in the early stages of the painting. As the work evolves unrelated collage elements are added and

images are partly covered, or destroyed until only clues to the original theme can be found.

In Martha Was Right (plate 12) a small transfer of Martha Mitchell, an early critic of the Nixon administration, is progressively destroyed as the painting develops. An indistinct image of Richard Nixon can be seen beneath the outstretched hand of God in a transfer of Michelangelo's Creation of Man, and Nixon aids Erlichman, Haldeman, and Mitchell are pictured above the backside of three fleeing horses. Randomly cut scraps from a newspaper announcing the former president's resignation are strewn about the composition. A piece of black cloth in the lower central portion of the painting resembles a map of the United States, although it is partly covered with gauze and blood, and two vague images of the national capitol hover over the entire composition.

Although Martha Was Right symbolizes something as sensational as the rise and fall of the Nixon White House, the theme is presented in such a subtle manner that a fairly discerning viewer might miss the point or at least interpret the painting quite differently. Brewer allows the viewer to bring his own set of values and experiences to the paintings and derive as much or as little symbolic content from them as he chooses or is capable of deriving.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Brewer has chosen, at least for the time, to work in the area of collage. He would rather assemble things that exist than attempt to create an existence through the use of paint alone. His materials provide a starting point from which ideas grow and evolve until a painting is created or abandoned.

Collage is a technique oriented process in which the characteristics of the materials employed and accidents that occur during the creation of a work play an important role in its final appearance. Many of the visual effects in Brewer's collage paintings are discovered rather than imposed. He is inclined to agree with Joshua Taylor who wrote in his foreword to Rauschenberg's 1976 retrospect exhibition catalogue, "the most stirring sense of beauty comes from order found, not order given..."⁴⁰

Brewer was inclined to use a building process in his art before he was aware of the work of Rauschenberg, Schwitters, or Burri, but studying the work of these artists has allowed him to add to his repertoire of collage techniques and materials and expand his perception of what can be considered art. Knowledge gained through this research coupled with discoveries made while building collages has led him through a series of

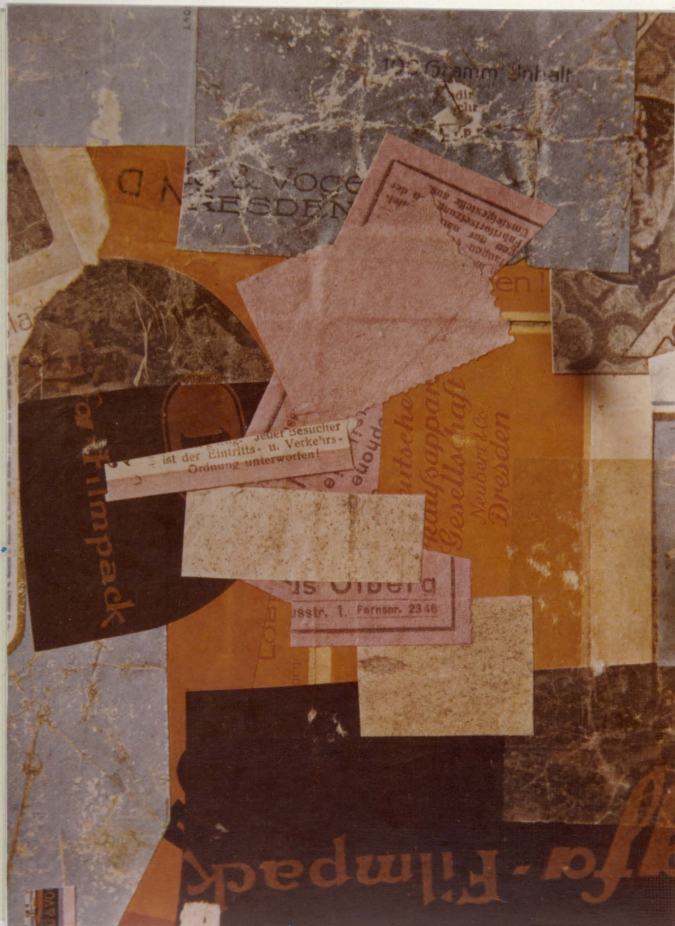
⁴⁰Joshua C. Taylor. "Foreword," Robert Rauschenberg, National Collection of Fine Arts, p. ix.

paintings closely resembling the work of Rauschenberg, Schwitters, and Burri, and he has arrived at a style that bears the influence of all three and yet has a character of its own.

COLOR PLATES

1. Merz 26, 41., 1926

Kurt Schwitters



2. Retroactive I, 1964

Robert Rauschenberg

84 x 60"



3. Sack 5P., 1953

Alberto Burri

59 x 51"



4. Morning News Blues, 1977

Ken Brewer

29 x 41"



5. We're Gonna Make You a Star, 1976

Ken Brewer

22 x 27"



6. Fight of the Century, 1978

Ken Brewer

27 x 33"



7. Liza III, 1978

Ken Brewer

18 x 12"



8. Down on the Farm, 1977

Ken Brewer

43 x 65"

NET

WESTERN BAKERIES

185

OHIO
& BROS.

THIS BAG NOT TO BE SO
AS IT IS THE PROPERTY OF

FROEDT
GRAIN & MALT

9. Sack with Stripes, 1978

Ken Brewer

45 x 35"



10. Farm Number Two, 1978

Ken Brewer

43 x 60"



11. Yogart, 1977

Ken Brewer

6 x 5"



12. Martha Was Right, 1978

Ken Brewer

45 x 35"



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